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ABSTRACT

A study explored ways of improving satisfying and dissatisfying conversations in order to have more effective interethnic communication. Specifically, research questions based in accommodation theory addressed what blacks feel could be done to improve both successful and unsuccessful conversations with whites. Twenty-four undergraduates at a Southwestern university completed a questionnaire for which they recalled satisfying and dissatisfying conversations with a white person and provided demographic information. Analysis produced five categories of alignment strategies: (1) asserting a point of view, (2) open mindedness, (3) lack of resolution, (4) interaction management, and (5) other orientation. Interaction management and other orientation were seen as strategies for improving already satisfying interactions while the remaining strategies were used to align dissatisfying interactions. In general, results showed that to promote alignment, respondents felt that the self should become more assertive about the topic, the other person should become more open-minded, and the conversation should be managed more smoothly through interaction management. Given the accommodation difficulties of interethnic communication, alignment strategies are important for effective interethnic relationships. Further research should test the efficacy of strategies suggested by participants in this study.A three-page reference list concludes the document. (SRT)

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THE ALIGNMENT OF INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION

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The Alignment of Interethnic Communication

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Abstract

Studies have documented the barriers to effective interethnic communication. This study explored ways of improving satisfying and dissatisfying conversations. The method consisted of content analysis of open-ended survey responses describing interethnic conversations. Five alignment strategies are identified: Other Orientation, Interaction Management, Asserting a Point of View, Open-Mindedness, Lack of Resolution.

THE ALIGNMENT OF INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION

Much has been written about ethnic communication styles and the barriers to communication imposed by ethnic differences. News reports are crowded with stories of ethnic strife in the United States and throughout the world. Ethnic differences pose a challenge to communicators; a challenge to find a means for bridging cultural diversity.

Speech accommodation theory provides insight into this communicative challenge. The theory attempts to explain the processes through which interactants modify their messages to match their conversational partner, predicting conditions under which speech convergence and divergence will occur. According to the theory interactants attempt to match each other's style, accommodating or adjusting to linguistic and social patterns. Successful tests of the theory's predictions have been reported for variables such as pronunciation (Giles, 1973), vocal intensity (Natale, 1975), talk and silence sequences (Capella & Planalp, 1981), pause and utterance length (Jaffe & Feldstein, 1970) and speech rates (Webb, 1972). In general, these studies show that people will converge linguistically when the costs are less than the rewards, there is a desire for communicative efficiency, and the social norms do not dictate alternative strategies (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Bourhis, 1985). Conversely, divergence is likely to occur when the encounter is defined in intergroup terms and there is a strong desire for group identity or when there is the desire to disassociate self from other (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Bourhis, 1985).

Perhaps as a result of speech accommodation theory's sociolinguistic roots most of the research using the theory analyzes data at the 'micro' level. Typically, conversational analysis is applied, identifying speech acts which converge or diverge in the accommodation process. While these studies are useful, it is important to complement these analyses with more macro level analyses. One such level is that of the conversational strategy.

It has been suggested that communicators often make predictions about the direction and outcomes of their interactions and design strategies to actualize their preferences (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Miller & Steinberg, 1975). While it seems clear that much communication occurs 'mindlessly' or outside of awareness (Langer, 1978), when communicators are faced with atypical events outside of their scripted sequencing they seem to become more aware and strategic (Douglas, 1983). Since difficult accommodations should make strategicness more salient, it is important to examine accommodation strategies.

Ethnic differences potentially inhibit the accommodation process. Strong ethnic group identity can promote divergence, as can peer group pressures. When dyadic partners do not share the same ethnic culture, it is more difficult to know how to adjust to each other and the adjustment process may require a communication style (e.g., fast rate among southern blacks) that is not a frequently utilized aspect of the cultural repertoire. Studies suggest that not only do different ethnic groups not share the same communication rules (Collier, Ribeau & Hecht, in press), but that members of these groups differ in the extent to which

they are willing to shift their rules in order to adjust to the ethnicity of their dyadic partner (Collier, 1982). With the great power differential in United States society, members of the mainstream culture have often been able to assume that other groups will adjust to their system. In point of fact, one of the most effective applications of social accommodation theory is the question of code-switching in cross cultural interactions (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977). However, rising controversies over issues such as bilingual and bicultural education suggest that social norms may be changing as emerging co-populations assert their own influence.

Blacks are an important ethnic co-population in the United States. In recent or contemporary history the civil rights movement documents the changing nature of ethnic or race relations in America. It is clear that institutional barriers have influenced interpersonal contacts between blacks and whites and have placed barriers inhibiting social relationships.

Social scientific research helps explain the forces which promote and deter interpersonal accommodation. One explanation for divergence is provided by Kochman (1982) who asserts that black and white cultural differences cause communication breakdowns. Contrary to the assumption that blacks and whites share identical speech and cultural conventions, Kochman describes differing norms for these groups.

In addition to these differences in norms and conventions, divergent social styles have also been identified. Kochman (1982) delineates some of these stylistic differences, pointing to patterns of intonation, expressive intensity, spontaneity, aggressiveness, and argument. Asante

and Noor Al-Deen (1984) who employ naturalistic methods to identify interactional differences in cafeteria settings. Hecht and Ribeau (1984) report quantitative differences in the kinds of communication blacks and whites find satisfying. Duncan (1978) and Jones (1971) find differences in the proxemic behavior of black and white school children, and Bachman and O'Malley (1984) report that blacks are more extreme in their responses. Gudykunst and Hammer (1984) demonstrate both similarities and differences in uncertainty reduction.

Both Ickes (1984) and LaFrance and Mayo (1976) report differences in interactional management. Ickes reports greater interactional involvement among white dyads, while LaFrance and Mayo describe differences in eye gaze and turn-taking. These and previously reported studies demonstrate the tension involved in interethnic accommodation. In the LaFrance and Mayo study, for example, blacks were found to gaze at their interactional partner more during speaking turns while whites gaze more during listening turns. This potentially leads to situations of mutual staring during black speaking turns and inattentiveness during white turns.

By emphasizing both convergence and divergence, speech accommodation theory points to success and failure events in black-white interaction. During convergence, the interactants successfully accommodate one another and the interaction can be labeled effective or competent. Even in these successes, however, one may ask how accommodation may be furthered. This leads to the first research question:

> What do blacks feel can be done to improve successful conversations with whites?

Speech divergence can be viewed as a 'failure event.' Failure events occur when interactions do not run smoothly, violate rules, violate expectations and preferences, and are somehow inappropriate. In other words, accommodation has been unsuccessful. If the interactants wish to improve the situation they must "align" the interaction. Alignments are techniques for achieving accommodation once a failure event has been encountered and the identification of alignments specifies those processes which tune the interaction to meet the interactants' preferences (Morris, 1988). Alignment research emphasizes the "cooperative efforts to guide the activity rather than efforts of 'offenders' to account for admittedly deviant behavior" (Morris, 1985, p. 70). Alignment research is concerned with restorative processes in problematic situations. This leads to the second research question:

What do blacks feel can be done to improve unsuccessful conversations with whites?

METHODS

Respondents

Respondents were 24 undergraduate students from introductory courses at a Southwestern United States university. The university is multi-ethnic and urban, with many of its students working full- or part-time. The respondents in this sample averaged 24.8 years of age with an annual family income of $20,108. Seventy-four percent of the sample was female. Respondents were selected from a larger sample based on self-identification as black.

Procedures

Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they recalled satisfying and dissatisfying conversations with a white person and provided demographic information. Both satisfying and dissatisfying conversations were used in order to obtain information on improving already successful conversations as well as re-aligning unsuccessful conversations.

For each type of conversation respondents were asked a series of questions. First, they described the location and topic of conversation. Second, they indicated what they did or said which was satisfying or dissatisfying. Third, they explained their answer. Fourth, they described what the other said or did which was satisfying or dissatisfying. Fifth, they explained their response. Sixth, they indicated anything else in the conversation which was satisfying or dissatisfying and explained their response. Finally, they indicated what they and their dyadic partner could have done to improve the conversation. This last question was crucial to the current research question, with the first six questions needed to interpret the respondents construction of the interaction.

Analysis

The data were content analyzed separately by each investigator and then the results were combined into a single category system. First, the report of each satisfying or dissatisfying conversation was read and the salient alignments recorded. Second, the strategies were sorted into categories by each investigator. Finally, the sorts of each investigator were combined.

RESULTS

The analysis produced five categories of alignment behavior: Asserting a Point of View, Open-Mindedness, Lack of Resolution, Interaction Management, Other Orientation. Each was observed in at least 20 percent of the questionnaires, and two had sub-categories.

Asserting a Point of View was observed in nine (37.52%) of the questionnaires. This category was found exclusively as a response to a dissatisfying conversation. Respondents felt that the conversation could be improved by arguing their own position and convincing the other person. One male said that a dissatisfying conversation could have been improved if he could "convince him [the other] to give the benefit of the doubt" to other people, while a female wanted to educate her partner about slavery in order to help him understand.

A subgroup in this category not only wanted to be more assertive, but also felt they should be more detailed, factual, and specific. For example, one female wrote that "if she had more facts she could have continued in my point of trying to make him realize these people need help."

The second category, Open-Mindedness, was observed on 14 questionnaires (59%), 12 of which were strategies for improving dissatisfying conversations. Respondents expressed a desire to have people consider their ideas or opinions, rather than dismiss them without giving adequate consideration. For example, a male wanted the other person to be "more open minded" and a second male said the other should "be more patient, not assume anything, find out first."

A subcategory derived from improving dissatisfying conversations through open-mindedness was labeled, Treating as an Equal, and appeared in four (24%) questionnaires. Examples included a female who wanted the other person to "not take a self-righteous position" and a second female who would have been more satisfied if the other "had been less inclined to a superior attitude."

The third category was called Lack of Resolution and was derived from aligning dissatisfying conversations. Five (21%) of the respondents fell into this category and felt the only successful resolution was to either avoid the topic or end the interaction. For example, one respondent said she could have improved the situation by "not bringing up the subject," while another female said the other could have improved the situation "by leaving my house politely."

The fourth category, Interaction Management, was observed on 8 (33%) questionnaires, exclusively among descriptions of satisfying conversations. Respondents mentioned regulating the amount of talking and the rate. For example, a female said that a satisfying conversation could have been improved by "just talking a little more" and another female said that the conversation could have been improved by "more time" together or a longer conversation.

The final category, Other Orientation, was observed on 5 (21%) questionnaires, most of which involved descriptions of satisfying conversations. These descriptions involved attempts to involve the other person, find common ground, and create identification. A female said they could have "talked about something he could have related to," while a male noted that he could have "asked better questions."

DISCUSSION

Five alignment strategies were identified in this study. These were Asserting a Point of View, Open-Mindedness, Lack of Resolution, Interaction Management, and Other Orientation. Interaction Management and Other Orientation were seen as strategies for improving already satisfying interactions while the remaining categories were used to align dissatisfying interaction. In addition, Interaction Management and Asserting a Point of View are seen as strategies for oneself, while Open-Mindedness is attributed to the other. Other Orientation and Lack of Resolution may be used by either self or other.

While many of these strategies may be found in the general competence literature (e.g., Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984), we feel they also articulate a black perspective as utilized by respondents in this study. Each of the categories has been found by previous researchers to be a component of black interaction style. LaFrance and Mayo (1976) and Ickes (1984) identify Interaction Management differences between blacks and whites while Hecht and Ribeau (1980; 1984) report that Other Orientation is more salient to blacks than other groups. Research by Kochman (1981) found that blacks adopt an assertive communication style, and Hecht and Ribeau (1980; 1984) found blacks to be more issue oriented than other groups. In this study the emphasis on issues is indicated by the categories of Asserting a Point of View and Open-Mindedness.

These studies indicate blacks are highly involved in the topic, conversation and other. This level of involvement may lead to an "all or nothing" approach to conversations. In aligning the conversation, the other person should become more open-minded, the self should become

more assertive about the topic, and the conversation should be managed more smoothly through interaction management. Failure leads to blame: closed-mindedness or lack of resolution. In attempting to accommodate each other and align conversations, these issues become particularly salient.

Given the accommodation difficulties of interethnic communication, alignment strategies are important for the effective practice of interethnic relationships. We expect that such conversations often diverge and require alignment. The competent communicator must be aware of the strategies in order to overcome the inevitable problems posed by cultural differences. Our research suggests that black interaction style contains the repertoire needed for such alignment work. Further research should test the efficacy of the strategies suggested by participants in this study and attempt to compare those strategies to those used in intra-ethnic communication.

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